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# Aviation Security Debate

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Washington -- The mandate for aviation security immediately after the Sept. 11, 2001, terror attacks was simple: fix it fast, spare no expense.

But after they created a $5-billion-a-year federal agency to protect airports, Congress and the administration have new guideposts for plugging the remaining holes: go slowly, control spending.

As the Homeland Security Department continues to warn that al-Qaida still is targeting commercial aircraft, lawmakers and officials are deeply divided on how much more aviation should be protected, particularly how much more to spend.

Consider the issue of portable anti-aircraft missiles that a single person can fire. Some experts and congressional leaders say the spread of missiles to an estimated 27 terrorist groups, including al-Qaida, dramatically threatens aviation. After terrorists fired missiles at -- and missed -- an Israeli airliner taking off in Kenya in November, the Israeli government recently decided to equip airliners with anti-missile systems.

Yet a measure introduced seven months ago by Rep. Steve Israel (D-Huntington) to install such systems on all 6,200 passenger airliners -- costing up to $10 billion -- has garnered only 12 co-sponsors and is stuck in a House subcommittee. The administration is studying the viability of anti-missile systems on passenger planes -- a process that will take until 2006.

"In the absence of these technologies, if one of those jets comes down, it's the end of the entire aviation industry as we know it," Israel warned.

Then there is uninspected air cargo, which fills about half the hull of each passenger plane, Congressional auditors say. None of it undergoes the physical screening for bombs now required of all luggage, and a House-passed measure to mandate such cargo screening is likely to be killed.

"Instead of wearing a shoe bomb or placing the bomb in passenger baggage, both of which would be screened, the next [would-be shoe-bomber] Richard Reid will simply send it in the mail," said Rep. Edward Markey (D-Mass.), sponsor of the cargo-screening measure, which House Democratic leaders support.

Yet the efforts by Markey and Israel face huge obstacles. They are costly, opposed by affected industries, and of disputed need. That is in stark contrast to the aviation-security overhaul enacted just 10 weeks after Sept. 11, 2001, thanks to support by everyone from the airline industry eager for a federal takeover of airport security to federal labor unions excited about 60,000 new public employees.

"To get these things to go through requires a coalition," said Paul Hudson, passenger advocate on the federal Aviation Security Advisory Committee.

Yet the only coalitions forming oppose new costly requirements as onerous. Visible security upgrades demanded two years ago to reassure the public and revive the airline industry now are seen as having the opposite effect.

Anti-missile systems mounted underneath an airplane wing "sends a negative message to the flying public -- 'that bump on the back of an airplane is in case somebody shoots a missile at us,'" said John Mazor of the Air Line Pilots Association, the largest pilots union. "I don't think we need to be sending that kind of a message to air travelers these days."

The 14 major passenger airlines also worry that screening their cargo would add such a delay that the $4-billion-a-year business would dry up. Markey's proposal applies only to passenger aircraft, not cargo-only planes, which carry about 80 percent of air cargo and are a less likely terrorist target.

"It's so prohibitive in time to add screening," said Carol Hallett, vice chairwoman of the Aviation Safety Alliance, an industry group. Airlines already are losing about $350 million a year from the post-9/11 ban on passenger aircraft carrying mail weighing more than 16 ounces.

The Homeland Security Department is addressing the threats with security upgrades that cost relatively little and minimize disruption of commerce.

Officials inspected the 82 largest U.S. airports, including Newark, Kennedy and LaGuardia, in January and local authorities took measures -- additional fencing, security patrols -- to guard airport perimeters, where someone might fire a portable missile at an airplane as it took off or landed.

Yet the Congressional Research Service, a nonpartisan agency of Congress, said, "These measures cannot effectively mitigate the threat." Terrorists could stand several miles from an airport and still hit an aircraft within the 15,000-foot altitude at which the missiles are effective.

Whether they would try is a different question. Administration efforts to contain the estimated 500,000 to 700,000 missiles in the world, which are mostly under state control, "have reduced the number of missiles that could have potentially fallen in the hands of terrorists," said Homeland Security Department spokesman Brian Roehrkasse.

U.S. officials say terrorists have launched 35 shoulder-fired missile attacks against foreign airliners since 1978 -- 34 of them in war zones, and only one was successful -- a Congo Airlines jet was shot down in 1998, killing 40 people. Other researchers put the death toll from all missile attacks on passenger airplanes at 550 to 760.

"I don't think it's a very high risk in the U.S," said James Lewis, a security expert at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. "The opportunities for terrorists lay outside the country." There are "maybe 1,000" missiles on the black market, Lewis added, "and they're hard to get into the U.S." Last month, the FBI arrested a man trying to sell shoulder-fired missiles to an undercover agent.

James Loy, head of the Transportation Security Administration, said, "There remains no credible threat of a terrorist organization having introduced missiles into the United States as weapons against commercial aircraft."

But Bruce Hoffman, a Rand Corp. terrorism analyst, said, "It's one of the most serious threats we face."

The failed attack last year in Kenya will only encourage al-Qaida, the suspected organizer, to try again using more advanced missiles, he said. "They will keep doing it until they get it right," Hoffman said.

Experts see less of a threat with a cargo bomb, which terrorists are not believed to have used, although several planes have been downed by luggage bombs. One deterrent is that a terrorist could not know what plane a package would fly on. Passenger carriers often shift freight onto cargo airlines, which have little value to terrorists.

Security involves screening companies that bring cargo to airplanes, ensuring they "have a demonstrated history of routinely, reliably, safely shipping cargo with a certain carrier," said TSA spokesman Brian Turmail. The agency plans to require more background checks of people involved in cargo and more computerized tracking of a shipment, and is trying to develop technology that would electronically screen selected cargo.

"Do you really need to look at a Fortune 500 electronics manufacturer each time it ships something?" said Scott Case of National Customs Brokers & Forwarders Association of America, whose members transport cargo to ports. "If you use smart targeting, then you don't need such a Draconian process."

Rep. Don Young (R-Alaska), the powerful House Transportation Committee chairman, is another key opponent. A GOP aide said that Young believes cargo screening would hinder interstate commerce and that in Alaska, "the only way to get anything is by air."